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RIYADH PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN, DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP,  
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: OIC SYG: IMPROVE UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM IN THE US;  
JCCI: SAUDI CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL "USELESS;" JEDDAH  
MUNICIPAL COUNCILORS: SAG "UNSUPPORTIVE"

REF: JEDDAH 248

Classified By: Acting Consul General CB Toney for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In June 4-5 Meetings Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee staff member Wendy Anderson met with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Secretary General, Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) board members, Jeddah Municipal Councilors, and other civil society and business leaders to discuss international security issues, U.S. policy in the Middle East, and Saudi government (SAG) consultative/reform efforts. OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu asked the USG to provide more support to U.S. Special Envoy to the OIC Sada Cumber and another OIC official briefed on the OIC strategy for combating terrorism (septel). JCCI board members deemed the Saudi Consultative Council, the Majlis Ashoura, "useless" and Jeddah Municipal Councilors criticized the SAG for lack of support and some stated that they would not accept re-appointment to remain for a second term. Dominating discussion with civil society and business leaders included issues such as optimism toward SAG reform efforts, dismay with U.S. visa policy, and suggestions on improving how Americans and Saudis view one another.

OIC SYG: "GIVE MORE SUPPORT TO S/E CUMBER"

¶2. (C) In describing how to improve the understanding of Islam in the United States, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu stated that the U.S. government should provide more support to U.S. Special Envoy to the OIC Sada Cumber. He added that he believed Mr. Cumber "had proven to be a good choice for the position" and that he has the potential to build support for the U.S. in the Muslim world. He also noted how President Bush's last June announcement of plans for an envoy was significant but lamented the lack of American media coverage. While Ihsanoglu spoke positively of his experiences with speaking about Islam in the U.S., he expressed concern that it was not spreading "beyond the elite." In response to Ihsanoglu's suggestion that he meet with U.S. Senators in charge of Middle East-relevant Committees, Anderson offered to assist him with working through the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) to facilitate opportunities to speak about Islam in the U.S. (NOTE: Anderson is a Term Member of CFR. END NOTE.)

OIC SYG HIGHLIGHTS THE ORGANIZATION'S CHALLENGES

¶3. (C) Switching topics to challenges the OIC faces, Ihsanoglu highlighted three: transforming the Organization from a secretariat that organizes conferences to one that can address problems in the Muslim world; enabling Muslim countries to transform into "knowledge societies;" and

implementing the Ten-Year Program of Action that includes OIC institutional reform as well as an outline for future activities around the World. When asked how the OIC measures success, Ihsanoglu stated: "We are trying to reform institutions here." (COMMENT: Ihsanoglu did not address how to measure reform efforts in the Muslim world. END COMMENT.)

JCCI BOARD MEMBERS "MAJLIS ASHOURA: WHO ARE THEY WORKING FOR?"

¶4. (C) In a conversation about general reform efforts, JCCI board members Sami Fouad Bahrawi and Lama Suleiman spoke about the need for a change in the Majlis Ashoura members as well as how they operate. Bahrawi and Suleiman complained that there were "too many Academics," and as a result, discussion was "too Academic." They also said that they lack initiative, adding that they receive their mandate directly from the Council of Ministers. (NOTE: Friday mornings some Majlis Ashoura debates are broadcast Kingdom-wide. END NOTE.) They cited one example in which the Council chose to focus on unifying closure times for shops and businesses. They said that such a debate was futile as the measure was infeasible for Jeddah, and furthermore, that the debate focused on word choice rather than substance. Referring to a more recent case, they criticized the Council's decision to discuss sexual harassment policies when "Less than 1% of the working Saudi women are in a mixed (gender) environment."

JEDDAH CITY COUNCILORS COMMENT ON INSUFFICIENT SAG SUPPORT

¶5. (C) Reiterating the common complaint of not receiving support from the SAG (reftel), Council President Tarek Fadaak and Vice President Hasan Zahrani stated that they needed a larger mandate and accompanying budget. As a result, they

said that the Council's credibility among Jeddah residents will remain a challenge through the June 2009 Municipal elections. At least two of the appointed Councilors, Fadaak as well as Councilor Abdulrahman Yamani, stated that they would not accept re-appointment to remain on the Council for a second term. (NOTE: The Council comprises 14 members: 7 appointed (liberal) and 7 elected (conservative). END NOTE.) Abdulrahman added bluntly: "I am not happy with my performance; I am not happy with the results."

JEDDAH ELITE ADDRESS SAG REFORM EFFORTS, US VISA POLICY, AND US-SAUDI PERCEPTIONS

¶6. (C) Over the course of Anderson's two-day visit, Saudi civil society and business leaders shared their opinions on several issues. Samar Fatany, Anchor of Saudi Radio English Broadcast, stated (without identifying any examples) that she received positively the SAG's recent reform efforts. In the past, she said, the SAG would create several committees to deal with an array of issues but they would never produce results. In contrast, she added, there is now "a strong political will for change." (COMMENT: Those seated nearby, including Saudi young professional and Jeddah Economic Forum staff member Rasha Hefzi, nodded in agreement. END COMMENT.)

¶7. (C) Another issue that arose frequently was dismay with U.S. visa policy: several elite, including King Abdullah University English Literature Professor Afnan Fatani, bemoaned the change in the visa application process since 9/11, and said as a result that they no longer felt "welcome" in the United States. (COMMENT: This is a common statement in Jeddah, as the Consulate General no longer issues visas. However, ConGenoffs frequently remind Post contacts of the USG desire for Saudis to visit and study in the U.S. END COMMENT.) On improving U.S.-Saudi perceptions, businessperson and writer Hanan Shobokshi, stated that there existed a strong need for Americans and Saudis to improve how they view one another and many, such as activist and writer Fatin Bundagji, cited increased exchange programs and inter-faith dialogue as possible solutions.

TONEY